

Leveling, Text Complexity, and Matching Students with Texts in the Common Core Era: Where Is the Child?

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The last issue of the *Illinois Reading Council Journal* included two commentaries regarding matching students with texts in light of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS): Jerry Johns urged teachers to match students to instructional level texts, while Timothy Shanahan charged instructional level theory as too simplistic and recommended providing students with challenging texts. While we applaud Johns' caveats regarding one-size-fits-all instruction and appreciate Shanahan's skepticism of leveling, both commentaries left us asking, where do children fit into the equation?

Two years ago, when Lara asked her son, Nate (a 2nd grader), what he was reading in school, here is how the conversation unfolded:

Nate: You know how my desk is near the table where my teacher does reading groups?

Lara: Yeah.

Nate: Well, I was supposed to be reading my book at my desk—and I did. But then you know what I did? [Sneaky smile]

Lara: What?

Nate: The higher group was talking about their book, Because of Winn-Dixie (DiCamillo, 2001), so I read my chapter really fast, then I pretended to keep reading, but really I was listening to what they were saying. Can we get that book?

The next day, Lara brought *Winn-Dixie* home for Nate. If you were Nate's teacher and had been lucky enough to observe his clandestine participation in the book discussion, and later learned that he began reading *Winn-Dixie* (a difficult text for him) on his own, our hope is that you would consider the anecdote as meaningful evidence regarding his developing skills and identity as a reader.

To be fair, the topic of matching students and texts is too complex to fully address in a brief commentary. Nevertheless, we worry that together the commentaries by Johns and Shanahan invite a dangerous dichotomy: Provide instructional level texts for readers or provide challenging texts at or above grade level for readers. One danger is that neither accounts for the reader's background knowledge, interests, and experiences. What is deemed *instructional*, *frustration*, or *complex* is situational, partly determined by the individual child and contextual factors (Calkins, Ehrenworth & Lehman, 2012; Pitcher & Fang, 2007), not simply a group of texts labeled with a number, letter, or grade level. Providing interesting text choices, consisting of "trade books of diverse levels of difficulty" (Guthrie, 2001, para 24), and enabling student choice enhance reading motivation (Gambrell, 1996; Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000). Thus, students should play a central role in text selection, a process that takes time, practice, modeling, and accountability (Wedwick & Wutz, 2008).

However, another danger is "leveling mania" (Szymusiak & Sibberson, 2001), whereby children become identified by their assigned level and are required to select texts only from within that level from libraries that have been meticulously leveled (Dzaldov & Peterson, 2005; Kontovourki, 2012), even for independent and home reading. The oversimplification of a complex issue fosters rigid and distorted implementation and a false sense of "best practice" (Glasswell & Ford, 2011) in which students are prevented from reading widely, developing

reader preferences, and learning to match *themselves* with texts (Pitcher & Fang, 2007).

Returning to Nate, we imagine that thoughtful teachers would neither dismiss the event because “Nate is a P, not an R” or because there is not enough experimental research on the topic, nor simply provide him with above grade level texts. Teachers might re-administer assessments, explore Nate’s interests and home reading choices, and perhaps question their current system for matching students and texts for focused instruction. Ideally, teachers would also consider how to scaffold students’ reading of more sophisticated texts.

The CCSS’s Model of Text Complexity includes quantitative (lexile/readability), qualitative (purpose, structure, and language of the text), and reader and task (experience, motivation, and prior knowledge) measures. While the model is presented as an equilateral triangle, oftentimes only quantitative measures, with perhaps a nod to the qualitative, are considered. Nate’s story, however, illustrates the importance of reader and task-related factors. Any approach to text selection that omits the third measure is incomplete.

A similar principle can be applied when consulting research to guide practice. “Evidence based” includes qualitative in addition to experimental and quantitative data (International Reading Association, 2002). Moreover, important evidence presents itself daily in our classrooms. We urge teachers to observe and document students’ knowledge, interests, and interactions, and to analyze that data as they design instruction (Owocki & Goodman, 2002).



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Text Matching and the Common Core: A Coach's Case for Allowing Students to Match Themselves with Challenging Texts

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In reading the last issue of the *Illinois Reading Council Journal*, I was both surprised and elated to read the debate between Professor Emeritus Dr. Jerry Johns and IRC Reading Hall of Fame Professor Dr. Timothy Shanahan over whether or not teachers should match students with books according to their diagnosed reading levels. While I must admit as a reading specialist that I found myself affirmatively nodding

throughout Johns' piece, I must also then admit that Shanahan did a fabulous job of poking holes in Johns' argument by arguing for more rigorous text selection as is espoused in the Common Core State Standards. This left me wondering, with whom did I agree more? So as any good student would do, I read; I reread; I read; and I reread again, leading me to this conclusion: I agree with neither of them.

That is not to say that I disagree with their central tenants. In fact, I am a firm believer in both student/text matching and the notion that the only way to raise achievement is to raise instructional rigor. I am not arguing against either in that regard. Where my point of contention lies is with whom that responsibility ultimately lies: the teachers rather than the students.

I know you are wondering how I could disagree with both esteemed professors. I, too, wondered the same thing and tried talking myself out of it, but I could not. And here is why. To help me make my decision, I decided to go through each piece and count the number of times each author referred to students. My rationale was to see whose argument was more student-centered. My count: Johns, 18 times; and Shanahan, 13 times. The numbers, however, quickly became irrelevant to my nonscientific analysis. What did begin to emerge, though, as a result of my line-by-line search for references to students was a pattern common in both pieces: passive students receiving what was given to them. This is when I realized that I agreed with neither piece.

As a high school reading teacher and literacy coach, I spend part of my day working with struggling readers and writers, and the other half of my day is spent in a variety of roles with teachers, including coaching. At the core of what I do every day in both roles is to create scenarios to push students to become active participants in their own literacy development,

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